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“How to Pack a Hall”:  
MoI Mobile Film Shows for the Women’s Institute and Civic Film Culture in Wartime  
Britain

Hollie Price

**Abstract:**

In the 1930s, the documentary film movement had experimented with non-theatrical distribution and it was championed by John Grierson, who claimed that the ‘future of cinema . . . may creep in quietly by way of the YMCAs, the church halls and other citadels of suburban improvement’ (1979: 69). This article explores the wartime evolution of this idea by expanding on the MoI’s organisation of mobile film shows in practice: uncovering archival evidence of Helen de Mouilpied’s work organising the regional film exhibition scheme, and focusing on the programming of film shows for women including those held on a regular basis for the Women’s Institute (WI) in the ephemeral spaces of village halls. By taking into consideration records of de Mouilpied’s distribution work at the Ministry and the often insubstantial, fragmentary and regional traces of film shows in Ministry records, local press and the WI journal *Home & Country*, this article offers a new view of the non-theatrical operation’s role as ‘useful cinema’ in the MoI Films Division’s propaganda programme, and its encouragement of a civic film culture on the home front that has been overshadowed in British film history.

**Key words:** British film documentaries; Helen de Mouilpied; Ministry of Information (MoI); mobile film shows; non-theatrical distribution/exhibition; Women’s Institute (WI).

In 1942, *Home & Country: The Journal of the Women’s Institutes* enthusiastically reported the triumphant results of organising an afternoon film screening of six films – including *The*

*R.A.F. in Action* (1942), *White Battle Front* (1940), a film on the medical services, and *Sowing and Planting* (1941) – in a village hall.<sup>1</sup> Based on this experience, its author and Women's Institute (WI) member Mary Bradley offered advice on how to hold a film show under the auspices of the Ministry of Information (MoI), either by borrowing films from the Central Film Library or writing to the local MoI Film officer and requesting a free visit from one of their mobile film units (Bradley 1942: 93). Stationed at the MoI's thirteen regional offices or nearby, the majority of the mobile units consisted of a saloon car or van containing a 16mm sound-on-film projector and a collapsible screen: they formed part of a domestic distribution network that also included film screenings in cinemas outside of ordinary working hours, lending films to those societies and institutes with their own projectors, and installing static projectors in public libraries.<sup>2</sup> As Bradley's article suggests, the group requesting a film show was responsible for providing a darkened hall and an audience and she advises on 'How to Pack a Hall' by: promoting the screening and putting up bold ministry posters around the village – at the post office, the butcher's, the church porch and two 'in the George and Dragon'; sending an advance notice to local newspapers and the parish magazine; and informing other organisations such as the Red Cross, the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS), the Mothers' Union and the Dramatic Club 'by post, by phone or by casual word in the village street' (Ibid: 93).

By September 1943, there were 150 MoI mobile units in operation, and they were being used to give film shows for a variety of audiences in village halls and factory canteens, as well as specialised instructional shows for doctors, civil defence workers, the National Fire Service and farmers.<sup>3</sup> Ministry reports estimated that one third of shows each week were given in factories, one third were of a specialised kind held on behalf of other government departments, and a third were for village audiences, women's organisations and groups in small country towns.<sup>4</sup> The WI, whose image in popular memory is often associated with the

war effort on the home front and whose members were involved with a variety of propaganda campaigns – including holding collections of scrap iron, waste paper and bones for salvage, lining coats with rabbit fur for donation to Russia, and hosting knitting circles for the forces and make do and mend clubs – was an ideal candidate for organising, supporting and promoting the MoI's mobile film shows (Gibson 2008: 9). Refuting the WI's cosy, conservative image, scholars including Maggie Andrews, Lorna Gibson, Caitríona Beaumont and Lucy Robinson have drawn attention to its empowerment of women through its encouragement of education in creative, practical skills, its foregrounding of women's roles as both housewives and citizens, and its history of activism promoting national and local issues.<sup>5</sup> With this in mind, the local, informal mode of organising a film show described in *Home & Country* comes close to the civic role that John Grierson had envisaged – and promoted – for documentary, when in 1935 he stated: 'The future of the cinema might not be in the cinema at all. It may even come humbly in the guise of propaganda and shamelessly in the guise of uplift and education. It may creep in quietly by way of the YMCAs, the church halls and other citadels of suburban improvement' (1979: 69).

In histories of British documentary, though, filmmaking has tended to take precedence over distribution and exhibition (Chapman 2015: 86), and Grierson's pre-war promotion of non-theatrical distribution has further cast a shadow on the growth of the MoI's non-theatrical operation in wartime. The documentary movement's development of distribution networks beyond cinemas in the 1930s – at the Empire Marketing Board (EMB) and General Post Office (GPO) – has been discussed as merely a necessary publicity tool for Grierson's 'fledgling group of filmmakers' (Swann 1989: 76) and a fallback option that reflected 'his disappointment that documentary had not been able to secure a stronger foothold in commercial cinema' (Chapman 2015: 87). The MoI's wartime work in non-theatrical distribution has also been subject to analysis with one eye on Grierson's grandiose,

pre-war claims that ‘the future of the cinema may not be in the cinema at all’ (1979: 69) and there being ‘more seats outside the cinemas’ (Sussex 1973: 95). Film historians have drawn negative comparisons between the audience numbers reached by cinemas and those reached by MoI’s non-theatrical scheme, and also focused on the difficulties of assessing the size of the non-theatrical audience, especially in light of the documentarists’ eagerness ‘to maximise’ the impact of their work (Swann 1989: 169).<sup>6</sup> Analysis of the MoI’s non-theatrical network has therefore been somewhat contentious, closely entangled with a ‘Grierson Story’ (Low 1979: 48) and suffering from a lack of evidence, all of which has obscured a view of the actual planning, running and reception of the mobile film shows and their distinctive role in the Ministry’s film programme.

However, when Helen de Mouilpied (married name Forman) contributed to a conference on Film Propaganda and the Historian in 1973, she provided a detailed picture of how the non-theatrical scheme was organised, offering an account of the Films Division from the perspective of her own work in the non-theatrical department.<sup>7</sup> At the Ministry, de Mouilpied was in charge of all regional non-theatrical film activities, moving into film production in 1943.<sup>8</sup> Post-war, she was Chief Production Officer at the Central Office of Information (CoI) until her marriage in August 1948, when her husband Denis Forman took over her role briefly before he was appointed director of the British Film Institute.<sup>9</sup> In an article published in 1982, de Mouilpied stated that the non-theatrical scheme’s aim was to give ‘people the maximum amount of information and instruction or, if you like, education’ so that they could ‘possibly re-orientate their lives in wartime and understand the changing society around them’ (Forman 1982: 224). Her reflections echoed Grierson’s educationalist emphasis on documentary’s social potential for encouraging democratic citizenship and adapting to different audience specialisms. Demonstrating the wartime development of these ideas and the expansion of the Ministry’s non-theatrical network, de Mouilpied stated ‘I

cannot think now of any reason why we should have wanted to exaggerate the size of the audiences', suggesting instead that 'the case for mobile units lay, not in the large numbers of people they would reach, but in the flexible and selective way they could be used' (Ibid: 224); she described non-theatrical as a 'diverse operation [that] depended as much, if not more, on the work of the Regional Film Officers as on London' (Ibid: 226).

Revisionist historical research has since indicated the work of this 'diverse operation' in practice and suggested a need to readdress the question of the great audience 'outside the cinemas' conveyed by Grierson's claims. For instance, while Paul Swann stresses non-theatrical distribution's significance as an 'elaborate policy of self-advertisement' (1989: 76) for the documentary movement, he also highlights that the MoI's non-theatrical initiative allowed documentarists to 'experiment boldly with the use of documentary film as a means of public education' (168), aiming at smaller audiences and encouraging a different kind of experience to commercial cinemas. Likewise, Chapman highlights the usefulness of de Moulpiéd's account and emphasises the 'different nature' of non-theatrical films, suggesting that 'the real value of the non-theatrical programme was not the size of its audience, but its composition' (2015: 98-9). Katerina Loukopoulou argues that 'the adoption of such interventionist cultural policies in support of film exhibition altered the popular perception of what cinema stood for at this time, thus shaping a new kind of film culture in post-war Britain' (2019: 59). Furthermore, a breadth of scholarship in new cinema history – defined by its shift away from 'the primacy of the film text towards an open-ended study of cinema's flow through places, spaces, cultural, affective and institutional sites' (Gennari, Hipkins and O'Rawe 2018: 2) – has reassessed exhibition beyond cinemas: film screenings in churches, schools, libraries, museums, village halls and parks have been productively, and variously, defined as useful, educational, rural and ephemeral cinema. This field therefore productively moves away from the negative connotations term non-theatrical would imply and instead, as

identified by Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson, emphasises its ‘mobility, hybridity and malleability’ (2011: 4), thereby offering a new lens with which to view the wartime expansion of non-theatrical distribution and exhibition.

This article expands on existing accounts of the MoI’s non-theatrical initiative by suggesting that its mobile film shows for the WI were developed with the aim of establishing a ‘useful cinema’ characterised by an embeddedness in experiences of ‘institutional and everyday life’ (Acland and Wasson 2011: 2). To illustrate this, I explore archival evidence of the planning and organisation of the film shows, focusing on Helen de Mouilpied’s role at the Films Division, and closely considering local evidence of film shows organised with the active involvement of the WI. First, drawing on the Ministry’s records at the National Archives, the Imperial War Museum and de Mouilpied’s papers at the BFI, I expand on de Mouilpied’s work of organising the regional exhibition network and the programming of film shows for women’s groups. Second, turning to local press, *Home & Country* and the Ministry’s regional records, I highlight the glimpses of film shows held for WI groups offered by fragmentary, local traces of their promotion and reception, suggesting that they offer vivid insights into the contexts in which MoI film shows took place in practice. While centring on film shows for the WI admittedly omits other audiences reached by the non-theatrical network, focusing on this particular aspect of the MoI’s operation opens up a new view of its influence in terms of reception, emphasising the way it carved out ‘places, spaces, cultural, affective and institutional sites’ (Gennari et al 2018: 2) for film exhibition in wartime Britain. By focusing on these everyday, extramural contexts for film shows, this article highlights the non-theatrical operation’s role as ‘useful cinema’ in the Films Division’s wartime propaganda programme, elucidates its address to women’s voluntary groups and illuminates its encouragement of an ephemeral, civic film culture that has been overshadowed in British film history.

### *Civic Aims*

Insert Figure 1

De Mouilpied was recommended to the Ministry's Films Division by Thomas Baird – head of the non-theatrical department and one of Grierson's 'documentary boys' in an influential position at the MoI in 1940 (Fox 2005: 357). She was recruited on the basis of her expertise in specialised film shows as well as her experience in contacting producers since she had previously worked for the Gas, Light and Coke company, the British Commercial Gas Association and the Imperial Institute.<sup>10</sup> In Films Division, Sue Harper notes that de Mouilpied (Figure 1) was 'virtually the only woman in the middle echelons' (2000: 32) of the division otherwise populated by middle-class, male personnel, with women largely working at lower pay grades as assistant specialists, research assistants, typists and secretaries. As Harper suggests, de Mouilpied undoubtedly faced discrimination in this environment, especially when it came to influencing the division's propaganda policy or its relationship with the feature film industry. However, her work – and her influence – in the division's non-theatrical distribution deserves closer consideration particularly given the argument that the non-theatrical field was one where women could make significant contributions to the Ministry's film work; this is indeed backed up by the career of another woman in the division's 'middle echelons', Miss R. Bloxham, who began work as the only female regional Film Officer and, by 1941, had been promoted to a Senior Assistant Specialist in charge of all overseas non-theatrical distribution.<sup>11</sup> De Mouilpied's responsibilities also developed significantly over the course of the war and, in the scheme's first year, included planning the work of the mobile film units and library projectors based on regular consultation with Film Officers in the regions; the financial organisation and regional spread of non-theatrical shows in cinemas; planning the role of film in special campaigns for other government departments;



and, at first, dealing with all requests for non-theatrical shows and all enquiries from women's organisations.<sup>12</sup>

Notes on non-theatrical films from 1946 in de Moulpiéd's papers suggest that the MoI's mobile film shows were introduced to give 'free shows to social and educational organisations in their own premises' and relied on an approach to the public that was planned 'to take advantage of the existence of innumerable voluntary, social and educational bodies in this country'.<sup>13</sup> Her later account similarly emphasised that one of the operation's main objectives was to reach rural audiences without easy access to cinemas so Film Officers worked closely with 'all local government and voluntary organisations' in their regions (Forman 1982: 224, 229). Associational culture was considered important from the scheme's earliest planning stages and the MoI's network directly built on the organisation of the GPO film shows via 'cooperative networks of schools, colleges, YMCAs, churches, men's clubs, women's organisations and educational associations' (Anthony 2012: 14). The GPO's non-theatrical equipment was included as part of the film unit's transfer to the MoI and Baird, who had previously headed the GPO's interwar scheme, planned its regional work along similar lines. In 1939, Baird had argued that non-theatrical distribution in wartime could be organised on the same largely voluntary basis as evacuation, suggesting that it would rely on 'scores of voluntary workers' in village institutes, county libraries and church halls, and would be a means of developing 'informal educational services in the community'.<sup>14</sup>

In September 1940, instructions sent to the MoI's regional offices established this civic focus, emphasising that the mobile film units were intended primarily to show film programmes to existing organisations that could provide a 'ready-made audience' and a 'suitable hall', aiming to reach Towns Women's Guilds, WIs, Mothers' Unions, Working Men's Clubs, Rotary Clubs, Church Societies, School Parents Groups, Tenants' or Residents'

Associations, Y.M.C.A.s, social clubs, and Civil Defence Groups.<sup>15</sup> These instructions stressed that film shows were to be held as part of the groups' regular meetings – where they could have a discussion of them afterwards – or as a 'special evening in the Association's syllabus' (as promoted by Mary Bradley in 'How to Pack a Hall' in 1942).<sup>16</sup> The shows were to be booked at the request of the secretary of a society or club who was responsible for getting an audience together and were therefore developed as a film service dependent on volunteering. In this way, the network encouraged a form of 'civic/cinematic activism', a term coined by Greg Waller in relation to the Office of War Information's Victory Loan campaigns which focused on encouraging owners of 16mm projectors to loan them 'to churches and clubs, take them into war plants, collaborate with civil defense organisations and "arrange showings of films at public meetings"' (2011: 137). It was appropriate, in relation to the MoI's 'civic/cinematic' scheme, that de Moulpied's earlier work at the Gas, Light and Coke company had involved the organisation of film shows with civic groups such as local authorities, women's societies, tenants' associations and housing societies; publicity for such events had similarly detailed that the company would 'provide talking picture equipment . . . to any society which can provide a suitable hall and a sufficient audience'.<sup>17</sup>

Indicating de Moulpied's significant work in this field of the MoI's operations, a month after the official launch of the scheme, in September 1940, Baird wrote: 'Miss de Moulpied is now working too hard. She has exceeded what should be reasonably expected of anybody. The responsibility of Regional relations is quickly increasing and there is little likelihood of her work slackening'.<sup>18</sup> The following year, he also stressed that de Moulpied, 'as a woman, suffers a 20% pay cut' and that her £400 salary was 'greatly out of proportion to the work she does and does not compare favourably with the salary of other people in the division'.<sup>19</sup> Pressing for her promotion to a specialist grade, Baird stressed the high responsibilities and large financial trust of her work, and head of division, Jack Beddington,

agreed that it was ‘very largely owing to [de Mouilpied’s] efforts that the non-theatrical scheme is a success’.<sup>20</sup> Beddington challenged the rejection of her case, noting that she was capable of heading the section and arguing that her ‘work is probably the outstanding case of intelligent planning and forethought that has come from this Ministry and is undoubtedly the most widely welcomed outside London of its overt acts’.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, he emphasised that the successful nature of the scheme had depended on both Baird and de Mouilpied’s input and suggested that ‘her maximum salary be put on the same basis as that of a male’.<sup>22</sup> However, these efforts were to no avail: Beddington was told that raising de Mouilpied’s salary was out of the question because ‘to maintain the recognised differentiation between men’s and women’s salaries is one of the Treasury’s most cherished principles’.<sup>23</sup> A further, matter-of-fact clarification suggested that ‘Miss de Mouilpied’s £400 must be looked upon as equivalent in everything but purchasing power to a man’s £500’.<sup>24</sup> With shifts at the division in 1942 and an increase in her responsibilities with the growth of the regional scheme, she was however eventually upgraded to the Ministry’s specialist grade – albeit still on the lower paygrade for women.<sup>25</sup>

Notwithstanding the behind-the-scenes fight for her equal pay, de Mouilpied’s papers showcase her dedication to non-theatrical distribution as an idiosyncratic means of reaching audiences beyond the cinemas.<sup>26</sup> For example, in July 1944, she wrote to Beddington and head of production Arthur Elton railing against a suggestion to cut film shows for general audiences in favour of specialised films for other government departments.<sup>27</sup> Fervently advocating the continued production of films especially for non-theatrical, general audiences, she stressed the large audience prepared to ‘accept more serious films, particularly on medical and scientific subjects’ such as *Blood Transfusion* (1942) or *Defeat Tuberculosis* (1943).<sup>28</sup> She particularly draws attention to the distinctive experiences of film spectatorship offered by non-theatrical settings stating that, by comparison with cinemas, ‘it is important to

remember that our regular non-theatrical audiences are not expecting entertainment for which they have paid' but hoping for 'information presented in as lively a way as possible'.<sup>29</sup> This distinctive mode of spectatorship was later restated by documentarist Basil Wright, who suggested that non-theatrical audiences 'are in a different mood – a mood of enquiry, or discussion' (quoted in Aitken 1998: 241), and by de Mouilpied herself when she explained:

The whole approach to non-theatrical production and distribution was based on the assumption that the same people were interested in different things at different times. A man taking his girl to the cinema probably would not want to see *Silage* even if you assumed that all the people in the cinema were farmers. But at a meeting of the War Agricultural Committee or in a Farmers Club, he might be interested and discuss it afterwards (Forman 1982: 226).

De Mouilpied's later account emphasised that, in these extramural settings, films could contain 'far more detailed information' and deal with subjects 'at greater length and in greater depth' than they would do in cinemas (Forman 1982: 225-26). Reaching civic-minded audiences 'already discussing or ready to discuss problems' was therefore a key focus in the early organisation of the non-theatrical network – and also shaped the development of film programmes for women.<sup>30</sup>

### *Women's Programmes*

Each of the mobile film units carried two spools that made up a general film programme, and a third spool that contained 'films of special interest to women'.<sup>31</sup> The programmes were organised or adapted as necessary by Film Officers according to the different needs of film shows and their regions, with advice on programme-planning from de Mouilpied in London.<sup>32</sup> A 1941 report on the scheme in the *Documentary Newsletter* distinguished

between the MoI's five-minute films shown in cinemas as short term, 'foreground propaganda' and the non-theatrical operation as a slower, long-term information service, focusing on 'public education' and 'background' information (Anon 1941a: 170-71). With this in mind, the aim of general programmes was therefore to 'present a picture of some of the many aspects of the war', including the fighting forces, civil defence, the British Empire, food, health, education, salvage, savings and thrift.<sup>33</sup> The specialised women's programmes centred on 'domestically and home-economically oriented films' with the aim of reaching women's voluntary groups in the afternoons (Moseley 2008: 20). These domestic films followed Baird's 1939 suggestion that non-theatrical film programmes would offer information on how to deal with 'the technics of the new way of life' on the home front.<sup>34</sup> As such, they encompassed a variety of demonstration films on diet and cooking, and documentaries on subjects including child and maternity welfare, teaching in the countryside (for the mothers of evacuated children), health and nutrition in wartime, and diphtheria immunisation.<sup>35</sup>

Baird's plans had emphasised that women evacuated to the countryside offered a good example of the wartime need for information. In 1939, he suggested (in a somewhat patronising tone) that 'We have already seen housewives lose their heads in their new and strange surroundings. The food available in the countryside has puzzled them . . . They have to learn again how to live'.<sup>36</sup> In a talk on the Films Division's non-theatrical work, Beddington similarly stressed the 'useful' nature of instructional cooking films or documentaries on diets and rationing, stating that while 'how to use dried eggs or dried milk, how to make up for a lack of fruit in the children's diet don't sound very promising subjects for films . . . women's audiences ask for them – for anything, in fact, to show how to make rations go further'.<sup>37</sup> Although Beddington suggests the banality of such 'useful', specialised films, women's film programmes offered some variety, ranging from the Ministry of Food's

1940-41 Cookery hints series of demonstration films – including *Oatmeal Porridge*, *Potatoes* and *Casserole Cooking* and Mary Field's *Wisdom of the Wild* (1940), an experimental wildlife documentary focusing on the rationing practices of plants and animals and their lessons for economising in the home.<sup>38</sup> And, in addition to home front advice, women's programmes also included documentaries promoting women's valuable war work: as 'ordinary housewives' in Ruby Grierson's *They Also Serve* (1940); in civil defence, the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) and the WVS in *Women in Wartime* (1940) supervised by Elsa Dunbar; and in health services in *Nurse!* (1940).

From her pre-war work at Gas, Light and Coke, De Moulpiéd already had experience of supervising the production and distribution of both instructional films on cookery, which promoted modern ideals of domestic labour and expertise, and social documentaries which investigated issues of housing reform, nutrition and public health with the aim of associating the company with a progressive image of democratic citizenship (Clendinnig 2004: 244; Hayward 2018: npn).<sup>39</sup> In a feminist piece of writing about housing conditions entitled 'Testament of Women' and written during her time at Gas, Light and Coke, de Moulpiéd stressed that despite some opportunities for a minority of women in certain professions, the work of millions of others – women's domestic labour – remained unrecognised; indeed, this was a theme addressed in Gas, Light and Coke's sponsored films and their non-theatrical distribution to civic organisations and women's groups.<sup>40</sup> De Moulpiéd's later account of the MoI non-theatrical scheme noted though that women's societies protested at only being shown 'special women's films' and this led her to announce at one Film Officers conference 'we would give up making films on cooking!' (Forman 1982: 226). However, her papers from the time offer a more nuanced view of the programming of women's film shows. Based on a report on the non-theatrical shows sent in by Film Officers in 1944, she noted that directly instructional films *Oven Bottling* (1943) and *Eggs and Milk* (1943), shown for the

WI, WVS and other domestic front audiences along with others such as *Patching and Darning* (1944) and *Pots and Pans* (1943), were considered ‘useful and liked especially if they were shown with other general films’.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, instructions to film officers had advised that a programme ‘specially suitable for women’ could be created by showing one of the general programme spools carried by mobile film units with the special women’s spool; regional reports on film shows for women’s groups indicate that they did indeed include films shown as part of the MoI’s programmes for general audiences.<sup>42</sup> For instance, in 1941 a WI group in Berkshire reported seeing MoI ‘films of absorbing interest’, including documentaries on aspects of wartime life described as ‘The Coastal Command’, ‘Women’s Work in Factories and on the Land’, and ‘Life on the Marshes’, as well as ‘Careless Comment’, which is likely to have been one of Ealing Studios’ short dramas about careless talk made for initial release as part of the Ministry’s five-minute series shown in cinemas.<sup>43</sup>

The WI’s emphasis on democratic citizenship, civic activism and adult education meant it offered precisely the kind of voluntary film forum the Films Division aimed to cultivate using non-theatrical distribution. Indeed, onscreen, the WI’s civic identity was emphasised in an MoI documentary *The Countrywomen* (1942), which explains the wartime work of WI groups in their local communities, and the mobile film unit programmes in 1940-1 included a series of Gaumont-British Instructional films on traditional handicrafts – *Handicrafts Happiness* (1940), *Rugmaking* (1940), *Quilting* (1940) and *Thrift* (1940) – made by Mary Field with the support of the National Federation of Women’s Institutes (NFWI) and featuring WI members (Anon 1940: 252).<sup>44</sup> Offscreen, records in local newspapers, reports in *Home & Country*, and the MoI’s reports indicate that WI groups regularly requested, organised and hosted film shows. In my explorations, I have found that traces of these film shows are often insubstantial or fragmentary, offering the kinds of ‘messy, unfinished and contradictory’ local stories that Maria Vélez-Serna (2020: 13) has explored in her study of

ephemeral cinema spaces. However, it is precisely in this contingent nature that they offer new insight into the use of everyday settings for showing and seeing documentaries in wartime, and the MoI's development of a 'useful', community cinema as part of the WI's voluntary work in the ephemeral spaces in village halls.

## Ephemeral Cinema

### INSERT FIG 2

On 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1944, a film show organised by the Carmyllie Women's Rural Institute (WRI) was reported in the *Dundee Courier* as illustrated in Figure 2. An unassuming notice on the inside page of the newspaper, immediately below correspondence relating to acquiring oranges for marmalade, school holidays and the Carnoustie church's activities, this brief report lacks information on the MoI films shown, themes covered or reception; it focuses instead on Mr Humphries, the driver-projectionist who ran the films in the tradition of outside speakers or demonstrators coming to visit WI and WRI groups. The notice nevertheless offers an evocative glimpse of the setting and experience of an MoI film show as part of the WRI group's usual activities – following an oatcake competition and the announcement of the winners – and as embedded in the life of the rural parish in Angus, Scotland where it was followed by a dance to music by a local band, as was traditional on a Friday evening in a Scottish village hall.

This insubstantial trace indicates a specific kind of cinema experience in an ephemeral cinema space that the MoI was cultivating through organising film shows for the WI. The Carmyllie film show relied on the temporary transformation of an everyday space – likely in a village hall – used for a variety of other activities, which Vélez-Serna argues generates a recognition of the experience of cinema, but one which is 'always partial, unfixed, and relational, as part of a negotiated use of shared time and space' (2020: 49). On this occasion,



the ‘partial, unfixed and relational’ experience of seeing MoI films is evident; the film show has taken the place of an invited speaker, is held as part of the WRI’s regular meeting with its planned baking competition, and in a multi-purpose space that was soon after used for a dance. Many other traces in local press and in *Home & Country* indicate that film shows were similarly held as part of regular meetings, alongside a variety of other civic activities on the home front and often as part of other wartime propaganda campaigns. For instance, in 1941 the *Newcastle Journal and North Mail* reported a film show at a WI meeting in Gateshead that also included a bread-baking competition and a discussion about the local fruit preservation centre, and one of the film shows reported in *Home & Country* in May 1945 includes a Hertfordshire group’s screening of housing documentary *When We Build Again* (1943) which was followed by a practical demonstration on how to rearrange a kitchen to save time and energy. In these contexts, the film programmes were a means of facilitating the WI’s existing interests in holding discussion groups; they were there to provide ‘the raw material of free discussion’(Anon 1941a: 171) and were held at regular intervals as Films Division believed this would ‘make for goodwill and willingness on the part of audiences’,<sup>45</sup>

The report of a local dance following the film show in Carmyllie is also suggestive of a blurring of boundaries between the film screening embedded in the WRI’s work and a local community event. The shift from film show to dance in the space of the hall necessarily would have entailed the kind of collaborative, physical work such as putting away chairs and setting up the band that Vélez-Serna describes as the ‘constitutive moments of the non-theatrical cinema experiences in village halls’ (2020: 86). The dance itself subsequently suggests a communal experience, although with different aims of offering temporary relief from the war effort. Other traces in local press and *Home & Country* similarly suggest film shows for WIs were held as special occasions involving their local communities and were also followed by concerts from neighbouring institutes or local bands, choir concerts and

community singing events, and town dances. Moreover, some suggest that it was the MoI film shows themselves that were ‘eventful’ in their own right (Vélez-Serna 2020: 86): evoking a sense of local eventfulness that was reflected in the mobile film shows’ reported reputation as the ‘Celluloid Circus’ within the division (Anon 1941a: 170). Indeed, in keeping with the WI’s efforts to promote ‘neighbourliness’ in wartime (Denman 1939: 369), reports on shows suggest they offered a way to bring together WI members from neighbouring groups, together with locals in towns and villages as well as evacuated mothers and children, and locally-stationed ATS workers or soldiers. Thus, film shows could sometimes draw large crowds. For instance, in 1941, *Home & Country*’s News from the Institutes reported ‘a Northamptonshire Institute invited 40 soldiers to see the Ministry of Information films. The evening ended with a variety show in which the regimental mouth organist was the star turn’ (Anon 1941b: 38).

While Films Division advised that groups were to avoid advertising the film shows as free entertainment, instructions to Regional Film Officers in 1940 suggest that they might provide audiences, especially in remote villages, with ‘recreative interest for the long, blacked-out nights of the winter’.<sup>46</sup> Although *Documentary Newsletter*’s account of a typical show emphasised the more uncomfortable aspects of a cold, echoing hall, a rattling projector and poor sound and visuals, several regional reports expressed delight in a film show’s potential transformation of everyday spaces and interest in the technology involved (Anon 1943: 187). For example, the Ministry’s Regional Officer in Northern Ireland described how the film shows ‘excited the interest of local residents because they had associated moving films chiefly with larger towns and it was novel for them to see a screen fitted up in a small hall and conditions in the legitimate cinemas almost reproduced in a few moments’.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, a Lichfield WI group happily reported in January 1941 that ‘the method of showing the pictures was most ingenious, the necessary machinery being installed in a few

seconds. The lighting was excellent, the operator being very skilful in his arrangements'.<sup>48</sup>

While these accounts suggest that there was more interest in the projectionist's work than in the contents of the MoI's film programme, other traces indicate a particularly intense engagement with the films displayed. For example, a report from the Northeast emphasised the 'arresting experience in the intimacy of your own Club, to see the Navy laying mines or to hear the explosion of the Channel guns in your Village Hall'. Indeed, as the films shown sometimes gave rural audiences their 'only chance' of seeing battlefronts, they could evidently create a more immersive experience that was all the more vivid for the show's context in familiar, and safe, environs of village halls.<sup>49</sup>

These local traces of the mobile film shows suggest that they could variously entertain, shock and thrill audiences. However, many of the WI's reports on shows merely reported them as 'interesting', 'enjoyable', or 'appreciated'. This often equivocal response was echoed in the North-Eastern Film Officer's report on audience response forms to de Mouilpied in 1944, when he suggested that, while 500 out of 1,300 recorded positive approval or disapproval of the films, 'most of the rest stated "All good", "All enjoyed"'.<sup>50</sup> The brief mentions and reports in regional press and *Home & Country* were often similarly politely positive in tone, presenting indications of a widespread acceptance and enjoyment of the film shows, and their provision of a community cinema balanced between 'regularity' and 'eventfulness' (Vélez-Serna 2020: 62). De Mouilpied's description of instructional films as 'useful and liked' is also an apt one for the development of the film shows as part of the MoI's regional work: organised and experienced as ephemeral cinema often 'unremarkable to its participants' (Vélez-Serna 2020: 62), and as a 'useful' film service closely integrated with the WI's voluntary organisation and mundane surroundings (Acland and Wasson 2011: 2, 13-14). By 1945, Film Officer J.R. Williams emphasised this with his description of the non-theatrical network as 'part of the life of the people', stressing its 'steady sober practice' of

showing films in communities (1945: 138). This, arguably, was exactly what the Select Committee on National Expenditure in 1940 had feared when it had initially rejected the scheme as too educational and thus not geared towards immediate wartime need, but which – through its organisation via the WI and in the community spaces of village halls – created propaganda for the war effort in the form of a ‘background’ film service (Anon 1941a: 170) and encouragement of ‘civic mobilisation’ and ‘citizen-spectators’ (Waller 2011: 139).

‘It may creep in quietly...’

Patrick Russell and James Piers Taylor’s examination of post-war documentary suggests that

The question of how wide . . . non-theatrical distribution actually went, or how great was its impact, hangs on the deeper question of what place community gatherings had in pre-war and post-war provincial life. Theirs was surely a bright presence, though the glowing glare of television eventually outshone it (2010: 27-8).

This article has explored the MoI’s organisation of its non-theatrical network through a reliance on voluntary organisations, and the ‘bright presence’ of the WI and community gatherings in wartime. The archival traces of film shows uncovered here indicate the wartime evolution of Grierson’s notion that documentaries ‘may creep in quietly’, encouraging ‘civic/cinematic activism’ (Waller 2011: 137) through a number of elements: Helen de Moulpied’s work at the Ministry; specialised women’s film programmes aiming to provide background information and instruction; and the active involvement of WI groups in organising and holding film shows. Foregrounding records of the scheme’s organisation and the often minor, local traces of film shows shines light on the MoI’s ‘flexible and selective’ (Forman 1982: 226) non-theatrical film network working in practice, and especially on its place(s) in an ephemeral landscape of civic film culture beyond cinemas. In the post-war

years, Russell and Piers Taylor note that this non-theatrical landscape evolved based on film libraries, film societies and a ‘sizeable’ audience that ‘probably tended towards the middle-aged’ and ‘rural and small-town middle classes’ (2010: 23). By this time, although the direct development of the MoI’s mobile film shows under the CoI was curtailed with the reduction of the scheme in the late 1940s and its eventual abolition in 1952; their wider influence and legacy rested on their background, civic organisation in wartime and the post-war ‘brightness’ of associational, community life.<sup>51</sup>

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### **Archival sources**

HFC Helen Forman collection, BFI Special Collections

HLA Huddersfield Local Archive

INF Ministry of Information records, National Archives Kew

SLB Sidney Bernstein collection, Imperial War Museum

All newspapers were accessed via the British Newspapers Archive. Unless otherwise stated, reports of WI shows referred to appeared in the regional supplements of *Home & Country*, which were consulted at the LSE Women's Library.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Some films mentioned in the course of this article have been referenced based on mentions in archival records alone and copies of them are not presently available in national film collections like the BFI or the IWM.

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<sup>2</sup> In 1941-42, there were several women driver-projectionists in charge of units, and more in training. HFC 1.1.10 UK Non-Theatrical Distribution 1941-42, Report on Second Year's Work. The projectors for libraries scheme was short-lived, ending in 1941. HFC 3.12 Notes on British Non-Theatrical Films, July 1946.

<sup>3</sup> HFC 1.2.8 Reports N.T. Films Distribution – Fourth Year Report, 1943-44; HFC 1.3.5 Draft Reply to Select Committee Letter, 19 April 1944.

<sup>4</sup> HFC 1.1.10 UK Non-Theatrical Distribution 1941-42, report on second year's work.

<sup>5</sup> As Beaumont (2018) explores, however, scholars continue to debate the WI's feminism.

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion of this debate see Thorpe and Pronay (1980) pp. 37-38; Winston (1995) pp.65-7; Chapman (2000) p. 112, 270n.

<sup>7</sup> A selection of Helen's papers – including the programme for the 1973 Film Propaganda and the Historian conference – were displayed as part of a 2019 exhibition by her son, artist Adam Forman, 'How do we remember?', Highgate Gallery, London, March-April. The exhibition panels were available online at <http://adamforman.co.uk/gallery/how-do-we-remember/> in April 2020.

<sup>8</sup> De Mouilpied's responsibilities are detailed in INF 1.126 Re-Organisation of Films Division, Details of Division Organisation, 30 July 1940 and in her CV, which was displayed as part of Forman, A. (2019) 'How do we remember?', Highgate Gallery, London, March-April.

<sup>9</sup> H. de Mouilpied, CV; Interview with Adam Forman, 23 April 2020. Helen was a governor at the BFI from 1965.

<sup>10</sup> INF 1.30 Staff Organisation, Films Division, Letter from T. Baird to J. Beddington, 30 April 1940; H. de Mouilpied, CV.

<sup>11</sup> SLB 65.17.2 Films Division Structure - Distribution; INF 1.311 RIO Meeting, February 1941 – Meeting of Film Officers.

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<sup>12</sup> INF 1.126 Re-Organisation of Films Division, Details of Division Organisation, 30 July 1940; Letters from T. Baird, 29 November 1940 and 18 July 1941.

<sup>13</sup> HFC 3.12 Notes on British Non-Theatrical Films, July 1946.

<sup>14</sup> INF 1.628 American Publicity, International Film Centre, Baird, T. 'The Cinema and the Information Services', Sixteenth Annual Conference of Special Libraries and Information Bureaux, London 1939, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> HFC 1.1.1 Revised Instructions to Regional Film Officers – Non-Theatrical Film Distribution, 1 November 1940.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.; SLB 65.17.4 Ministry of Information Film Programme, 3 October 1940.

<sup>17</sup> H. de Mouilpied, CV; HFC 1.7.1 The Nutrition Film Leaflet.

<sup>18</sup> INF 1.126 Re-Organisation of Films Division, Letter from T. Baird, 21 November 1940.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., Letter from T. Baird to J. Beddington, 5 July 1941.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., Letter from T. Baird, 18 July 1941; Letter from J. Beddington, 9 July 1941.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., Letter from J. Beddington, 7 August 1941.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., Letter from J. Beddington and reply, 13 August 1941.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> H. de Mouilpied, CV. INF 1.126 Re-Organisation of Films Division, distribution reorganisation, March 1942; SLB 65.17.2 MoI Staff Directories.

<sup>26</sup> De Mouilpied's correspondence particularly shows her interest in improving the visual and aural quality of 16mm film shows and she also continued to demonstrate a wariness of technical difficulties with the shows and the need for clarity in film sound and diagrams in her later talk (Forman 1982: 228; Aitken 1998: 24-25).

<sup>27</sup> HFC 1.2.18 Correspondence, Future N.T. Film Unit, Letter from H. de Mouilpied, 10 July 1944.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> INF 1.628 Film Publicity in America: International Film Centre, Baird, T. Report on the Distribution of British Documentary Films in the United States, August 1939.

<sup>31</sup> HFC 1.1.8 Programmes of Mobile Units for Non-Theatrical Distribution.

<sup>32</sup> HFC 1.1.1 Revised Instructions, 1 November 1940; HFC 1.1.4 Organisation of Non-Theatrical Distribution, 12 March 1942; HFC 1.1.8 Programmes of Mobile Units for Non-Theatrical Distribution.

<sup>33</sup> HFC 1.1.8 Programmes of Mobile Units for Non-Theatrical Distribution.

<sup>34</sup> Baird, T. 'The Cinema and the Information Services', 1939, p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> HFC 1.1.8 Programmes of mobile units of N.T. Distribution; HLA 16.01.14 Film propaganda, North Eastern region – film programmes for mobile units, January 1940; HFC 1.3.5 Draft Reply, 19 April 1944.

<sup>36</sup> Baird, T. 'The Cinema and the Information Services', 1939, p. 11

<sup>37</sup> HFC 1.3.1 Talk and Report on Films Division, 1941/42, Talk on Non-T by the Director.

<sup>38</sup> HFC 1.1.8 Programmes of mobile units of N.T. Distribution; HLA 16.01.14 Film propaganda, North Eastern region – film programmes for mobile units, January 1940; MoI Film Programme – About the House, c.1945. For an account of Field's films see Easen 2021.

<sup>39</sup> H. de Mouilpied, CV, 'The Gas Industry Presents...', Gas, Light and Coke magazine, November 1937, p. 608.

<sup>40</sup> H. de Mouilpied, *Testament of Women*, c. 1938, private collection of Adam Forman. See Haggith (2021) for an account of housing documentaries and domestic labour.

<sup>41</sup> HFC 1.3.11 Report of Reception of Films Used Non-Theatrically January-May 1944, De Mouilpied to Slater, 19 Sept 1944.

<sup>42</sup> HFC 1.1.8 Programmes of Mobile Units for Non-Theatrical Distribution.

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<sup>43</sup> *Home & Country*, regional supplements – Berkshire, July 1941, p. iii.

<sup>44</sup> BL M.O.I Film Programme, c. 1941.

<sup>45</sup> HFC 1.2.11 Report on Non-Theatrical Films, 4 January 1943.

<sup>46</sup> SLB 65.17.4 Non-Theatrical Film Distribution, Regional Film Scheme, 1 November 1940; Ministry of Information Film Programme, 3 October 1940.

<sup>47</sup> INF 1.297 Regional Information Officers: Organisation of Work, Regional History.

<sup>48</sup> *Home & Country*, regional supplements – Staffordshire, January 1941, p. iii.

<sup>49</sup> HFC 1.3.1 Talk on non-t by director.

<sup>50</sup> HFC 1.3.11 Report of Reception of Films Used Non-Theatrically, 19 September 1944.

<sup>51</sup> INF 12.362 Staffing and Organisation of Regional Offices, 1948-51; INF 12.363 Staffing and Organisation of Regional Offices, 1951-53.